DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 298 701 EC 210 635

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TITLE A Prereferral Process for Preventing Inappropriate Referrals of Hispanic Students to Special Education.
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 14p.; In: Schools and the Culturally Diverse Exceptional Student: Promising Practices and Future Directions; see EC 210 633. Paper presented at the Ethnic and Multicultural Symposia (Dallas, TX, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Disabilities; Elementary Secondary Education; Ethnic Groups; *Handicap Identification; *Hispanic Americans; Learning Problems; Multicultural Education; Prevention; *Referral; *Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS *Prereferrals

ABSTRACT

The paper, originally given at a 1986 Ethnic and Multicultural Symposium, sets forth a process to minimize inappropriate referrals of Hispanic students to special education. The prereferral procedure attempts to identify the sources of a student's learning problem and improve performance through determining student needs through consideration of seven sequential questions: (1) Is the student experiencing academic difficulty? (2) Is the curriculum known to be effective for Hispanic students? (3) Is there evidence that the child did not learn what was taught? (4) Is there evidence of systematic efforts to identify the source of difficulty and take corrective action? (5) Do student difficulties persist? (6) Have other programming alternatives been tried? (7) Do difficulties continue in spite of alternatives? Through careful consideration of teacher, student, curriculum and instruction, related factors, and alternative programs, educators can determine that cultural, linguistic, and other student characteristics have been accommodated prior to recommending referral to special education. (DB)

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A Prereferral Process for Preventing Inappropriate Referrals of Hispanic Students to Special Education

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Schools frequently fail Hispanics. According to Brown, Rosen, Hill, and Olivas (1980), the school drop-out rate for Mexican Americans is 66 percent. Evidence that Hispanics are undereducated is also found in standardized achievement test scores which show that these students traditionally score 2 to 3 years below grade level in critical skill areas such as reading, math, and science. Add to this a serious overrepresentation of Hispanics in programs for the learning disabled (Ortiz & Yates, 1983) and one would have to conclude that Hispanics have met with limited educational success. When such a dramatic proportion of the school population is unsuccessful, it is not appropriate to raise questions concerning pathology of individual Hispanic students. Rather, specific questions must be raised about the efficacy of the organizational system responsible for their education.

Regular educators seem to have difficulty distinguishing Hispanic students who have learning problems which can be addressed by adapting the regular education program from those who should be referred for comprehensive assessments because of suspected handicapping conditions. One explanation for this is that when students' cultural and linguistic characteristics are perceived as *deficiencies* rather than as *differences*, there is a tendency to blame the student for lack of success, rather than to question the effectiveness of the curriculum or instruction. According to Cummins (1984), when children experience failure:

> The orientation of the teacher and assessment specialist (or "teacher-consultant") should be first to examine critically the instruction offered to the child to assess the extent to which it is compatible with the way people acquire language and other cognitive skills. Essentially, this involves asking whether language use in the classroom is integrated with activities that the child is intrinsically motivated to carry out. (p. 268)

In a similar vein, Heller, Holtzman, and Messick (1982) argue that the major issues related to the disproportionate placement of minority children in special education are the *quality* of instruction provided in the mainstream and the *validity* of referral and assessment processes. Thus every district and every campus should have a clearly identifiable prereferral process in place to facilitate problem solving when students experience school-related difficulties. An effective prereferral process can help distinguish achievement difficulties associated with a lack of accommodation of individual differences in regular classrooms from problems that stem from a handicapping condition. The purpose of this paper is to suggest a process which

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incorporates considerations related to the education of multicultural populations in general and of Hispanics, in particular.

LEARNING PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN CLASSROOMS

Reasons for academic failure can be broadly classified into one of three types of learning problems (Adelman, 1970). The first type of learning problem occurs when students are in classroom environments which do not accommodate their individual differences or learning styles. For example, limited-English-proficient (LEP) students who need native language or bilingual instruction, but who are taught solely in English, can be expected to experience such academic difficulties. A second type of learning problem involves children who have mild to moderate achievement difficulties but, because these are not the result of handicapping conditions, are able to make satisfactory progress when instruction is adapted to accommodate their needs. This would be the case when a child did not learn to read because of excessive absences but overcame this difficulty after instruction was provided specific to skills he or she was lacking. Students experiencing these first two types of problems are at risk of being special education's "false positives" (Tucker, 1981). In these instances, rather than placing students in special education, teachers and other support personnel should receive training and assistance to more effectively accommodate students' needs and, thus, to increase the likelihood of school success. The third type of learning problem is that encountered by students who have major disorders that interfere with the teaching-learning process. These students require special education instruction to help them achieve their maximum potential.

Examination of characteristics of limited-English-proficient Hispanic students in programs for the learning disabled and the speech and language handicapped (Cummins, 1984; Ortiz et al., 1985; Ortiz, Garcia, Wheeler, & Maldonado-Colon, 1986) suggests that neither the data gathered as part of the referral and evaluation process, nor the decisions made using these data, reflect professionals' understanding of issues related to limited English proficiency, second language acquisition, or cultural and other differences which mediate students' learning. These findings support a growing body of literature indicating that many students served in special education are, in reality, "curriculum casualties" (Hargis, cited in Gickling & Thompson, 1985); that is, they experience difficulties which are "pedagogically induced" (Cummins, 1984). According to Hargis:

> These children, who are in fact the curriculum casualties or curriculum handicapped, would not have acquired their various labels had the curriculum been adjusted to fit their individual needs, rather than having tried to force the children to achieve in the artificial but clerically simpler sequence of grades, calendar and materials that comprise the curricula. (cited in Gickling & Thompson, 1985, p. 209)

MAKING CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION RESPONSIVE TO STUDENT DIVERSITY

The education of linguistically and culturally different students is the responsibility of regular educators. The prereferral process described in the following sections assumes that school districts endorse a philosophy of cultural pluralism and multicultural education, and that educators understand the influence of students' linguistic and cultural characteristics on learning and academic success. However, since teachers often have difficulty adjusting curriculum and instruction for students from cultural backgrounds different from their own, they should be assisted in developing skills that will enable them to teach from a multicultural perspective as well as teach a culturally diverse student population (Gollnick & Chinn, 1986). A major goal of such a philosophy is to alter the educational environment so that all students will develop competencies in multiple cultures and be afforded equal educational opportunity

(Bennett, 1986). The following principles summarize the major goals of multicultural and pluralistic educational programs (Gollnick & Chinn, 1986):

1. The educational program must use teaching approaches and materials that are sensitive and relevant to students' sociocultural backgrounds and experiences,
2. Learning styles of teachers and students and teaching styles of teachers need to be understood and used to develop effective instructional strategies,
3. Students' involvement in the learning process should be increased through an analysis and modification of oral and nonverbal communication patterns between teachers and students,
4. Educational programs must begin at the students' functioning level,
5. Multicultural content should be integrated at all levels of the curriculum rather than giving superficial, fragmented attention to these issues,
6. Educational programs must "deal with the social and historical realities of American society and help students gain a better understanding of the causes of oppression and inequality, including racism and sexism" (Suzuki, 1980, cited in Gollnick & Chinn, 1986, p. 271),
7. Resources from the local community should be incorporated into the educational program and activities.

CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC CONSIDERATIONS IN THE PREREFERRAL PROCESS

This paper attempts to build upon existing prereferral efforts (Graden, Casey, & Christenson, 1985; Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982; Tucker, 1981) by raising a series of questions specific to multicultural populations which must be addressed before a referral to special education is appropriate (see Figure 1).

Step 1: Is the student experiencing academic difficulty?

Because of the range in student backgrounds and abilities typically found in regular classrooms, it is to be expected that some students will experience academic difficulty. When this occurs, prereferral interventions aimed at identifying the sources of the problem and improving the student's performance in the mainstream should be attempted, *before* referral to special education is considered.

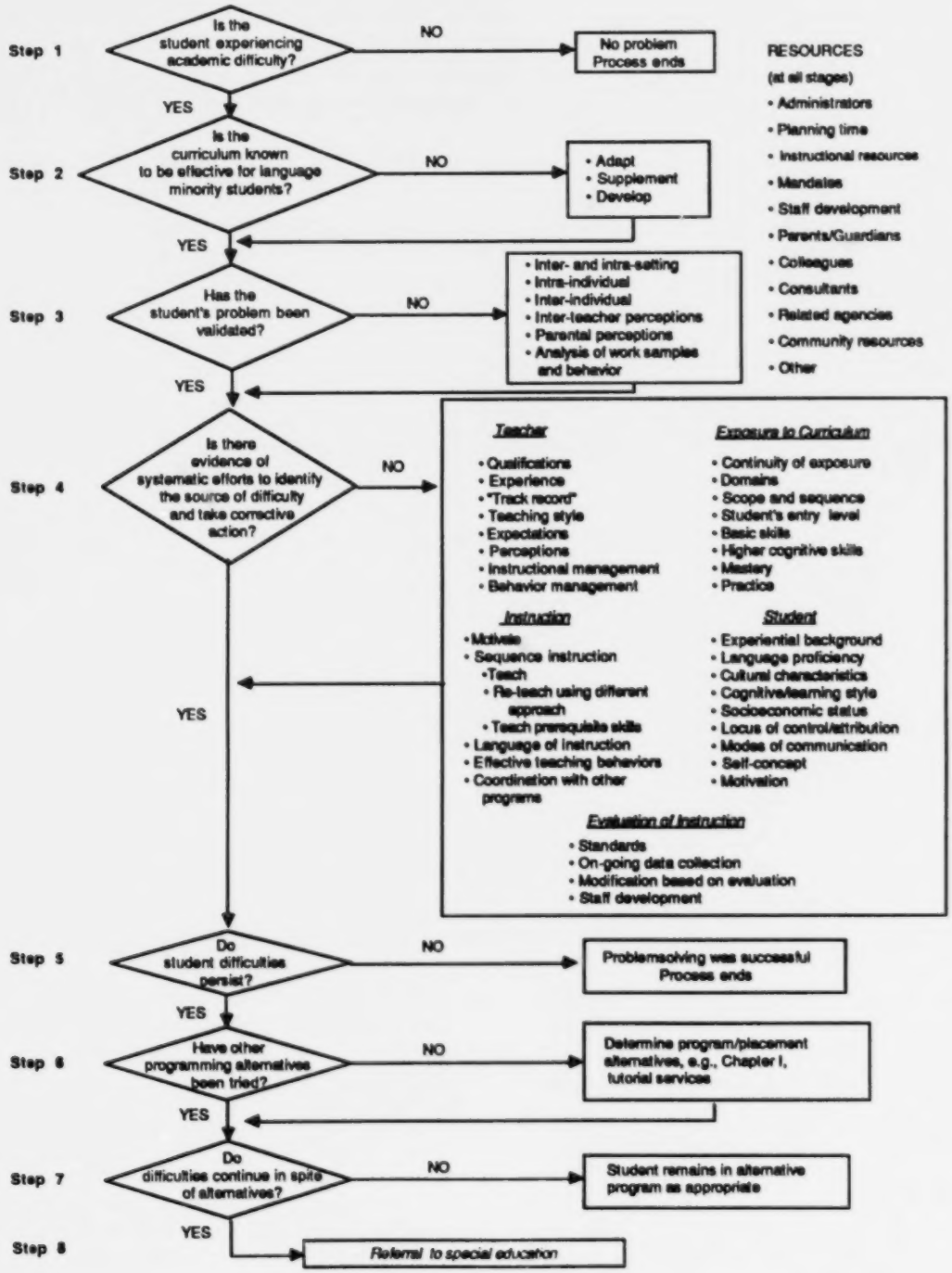
Step 2: Is the curriculum known to be effective for Hispanic students?

Because of the inadequacy of currently available curricula, districts are likely to find that they must continuously be involved in adapting and supplementing existing curricula, and in developing and/or validating new materials tailored for the multicultural populations they serve. For example, bilingual education and English-as-a-second-language programs were developed in recognition that limited-English-proficient students could not master the regular curriculum without a program of study to help them become competent in English. Native language curricula were incorporated as an integral part of bilingual instruction to ensure that LEP students did not fall behind Anglo peers on grade level subjects or skills while they learned English as a second language.

A beginning point in addressing the effectiveness of curricula is to examine achievement patterns in a district or on an individual campus. Representation of students at the high, middle, and low levels of standardized achievement scores should be proportional with the ethnic composition of the educational unit being studied. If Hispanic students historically make the lowest achievement scores, and constitute the majority of underachievers, indications are that either the curriculum is ineffective for these students or that it has been poorly implemented. If student failure can be attributed to the use of inappropriate curricula,

FIGURE 1

Preventing Inappropriate Placements of Hispanic Students in Special Education: A Prereferral Process



then referrals to special education are unwarranted. Efforts, instead, should focus on modifying or creating more effective instructional programs.

Step 3: Is there evidence that the child did not learn what was taught?

Identification of a student "problem" typically involves a judgment that the behavior is deviant from the norm. Several factors must be considered before this judgment can be validated, including observation and data collection in the following areas (Tucker, 1981):

1. *Inter- and intra-setting comparisons* must be made to measure the extent to which the perceived problem is manifested across different occasions and settings. For instance, is the difficulty evident in small group, large group and/or individual assignments?
2. *Inter-individual comparisons* must also be made to assess whether the perceived problem behaviors differ from those of other students in the class. Cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, and other relevant characteristics of the comparison group must be similar to those of the target student.
3. *Inter-teacher perceptions* are useful in identifying any teacher- or setting-specific problems that may exist, as is the case when similar problems are not noted by the student's other teachers.
4. *Parental perceptions* of their child's behavior are critical in determining the extent to which these are real problems. If parents confirm the school's perception, it is more likely that a true problem exists. When cross-cultural comparisons do not support such a conclusion, alternatives must be explored, including modifying the school environment or teaching the student the desired behaviors, without labeling "deviant" that which is culturally appropriate.
5. *Student work samples* can assist the teacher and other personnel involved in the prereferral phase in determining the specific nature of the perceived problem. Analysis of student products allows the teacher to define the problem in precise measurable terms, rather than with broad, general descriptors such as "below grade level in math," or "cannot read well." Work samples can also help develop hypotheses about the source of the difficulty; for example, is the student experiencing difficulty with division because he or she cannot multiply? Work samples are particularly important for students in bilingual education programs in that they serve to verify, or question, results obtained from standardized achievement tests which do not usually include representative samples of Hispanics and which do not measure Spanish language skills or achievement.

Step 4: Is there evidence of systematic efforts to identify the source of difficulty and take corrective action?

Once the problem has been validated, the fourth stage in the prereferral process requires that resolutions be approached from various perspectives, to include teacher-, student-, curriculum-, and instruction-related factors. Thus, in some instances, corrective actions include professional development and training for teachers; in other cases, the student may have to be taught prerequisite skills; in still other situations, a redirection of curricula and evaluation of instructional programs may be required. Since failure itself is a multifaceted phenomenon, it is likely that the solution, too, will involve more than one aspect of the child's school experience.

Teacher Characteristics

Many teachers, even today, are products of preservice training programs which focus predominantly on the education of White, middle class, English-monolingual students. As a result, teachers may not possess the knowledge, skills, and experience to be effective with the increasing number of students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. When teacher and student characteristics vary along any or all of these dimensions,

the potential for conflict and failure increases considerably. Such differences are often manifested as conflicts which could be *substantive* (e.g., disagreement over educational goals), *procedural* (e.g., mismatch of teaching and learning styles) or *interpersonal* (e.g., culturally relevant behaviors interpreted as behavior "problems") (Gay, 1981). All three conditions affect the teaching-learning process and a student's ability to profit from instruction. Given the high rates of failure among Hispanic students, it becomes essential to question the effectiveness of instruction, including the teacher's qualifications, experience, and teaching history, during the prereferral stages.

Teaching Style. Teachers are predisposed to teach in ways that correspond to their own learning styles (Ramirez & Castaneda, 1974). This poses few difficulties for students whose learning styles correspond to the teacher's teaching style, but can be devastating for those whose styles are incompatible with the instructional approaches being used. Teachers should be aware of their own learning and teaching styles and the extent to which their personal preferences dominate, not only management of behavior and instruction, but their expectations for students as well. Teachers can maximize learning by using a variety of techniques when they deliver instruction, thus giving *all* students the opportunity to utilize their own modality preferences or cognitive styles. This can be achieved by the use of multisensory teaching aids, learning centers where students can learn material in a variety of ways, diversified grouping patterns, variations in reinforcement systems, and so forth. Additionally, students can be taught to use alternative learning styles, thus increasing their chances of being successful, regardless of task conditions.

Teacher Expectations and Perceptions. In trying to determine the source of difficulty, the teacher's expectations should be evaluated, to ensure that they are neither too high nor too low, since student frustration and failure can occur under either condition. Teachers sometimes judge students' competence on the basis of race, sex, socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural differences, rather than on actual abilities (Bergen & Smith, 1966; Jackson & Cosca, 1974; Rist, 1970; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Richey, & Graden, 1982). Research on teacher expectations (Good & Brophy, 1973) further suggests that teachers interact differentially with students for whom they hold low expectations. For example, they wait less time for students to respond, offer fewer and poorer opportunities to learn, focus on student behavior and discipline rather than academic work, reinforce inappropriate behaviors, seat low expectation students further away, and call on them less frequently. Differential behaviors have also been noted in the treatment of boys and girls. Teachers who hold traditional sex role stereotypes may do a task for girls but give boys extended directions to complete the activity, interpret girls' silence as ignorance versus interpreting boys' silence as evidence of thought and reflection, and provide girls with less feedback, positive or negative, than boys (Sadker & Sadker, 1982). As the quality of instruction is diminished over time, for specific groups of students this alone could explain differences in achievement levels.

Exposure to the Curriculum

The central questions to be answered in determining whether a child has had sufficient exposure to the curriculum are whether he or she has been taught the subject or skill and/or whether this instruction has been interrupted. Students experience discontinuity of instruction for a variety of reasons, including having to stay home to take care of younger brothers and sisters in family emergencies, fatigue because they work late hours to help support the family, or simply because they are experiencing so many school-related problems that not attending is a way of relieving the pain of failure. These interruptions of schooling can negatively affect academic achievement and, if not addressed promptly can have cumulative effects devastating to future success. Unless teachers provide ways for underachieving students to catch up with peers, learning problems are more likely to be associated with the lack of opportunity to learn, rather than with handicapping conditions. Filling in instructional gaps requires that teachers understand skill domains (e.g., that

reading requires that children have an adequate language foundation and that they master both word recognition and comprehension skills), so they can assess each child's entry level skills and sequence instruction accordingly.

Basic Skills. Because special education referrals are usually concerned with mastery of basic skills, the prereferral process should document the extent and nature of prior instruction in these areas. Of particular interest is the language in which skills were initially taught. It is not uncommon for Hispanic students to be referred to special education on the basis of low English skills, even though their first schooling experiences were in bilingual education programs in which basic skills were taught in Spanish. For these students, a referral would be inappropriate until data such as the following are analyzed: (a) the child's English and Spanish language proficiency, (b) informal assessment results describing level of basic skills functioning in Spanish and English, (c) information about when the transition to English language instruction occurred, and (d) whether the child was functioning adequately in Spanish at the time of the transition. These data can help determine whether the child's problems are pedagogically induced, as might be the case, for example, if English language instruction were begun before the child had adequately mastered basic skills in Spanish or before she or he had acquired appropriate levels of English language proficiency.

Mastery and Practice. Sufficient time must be allocated for students to achieve subject or skill mastery and for skills practice. Students are sometimes engaged in independent practice activities before they have demonstrated adequate understanding of the task and, thus, incorrect patterns or behaviors are reinforced as they work on their own. According to Rosenshine (1983), ensuring adequate exposure to the curriculum requires that a child demonstrate mastery at a level of 95%–100% accuracy. Berliner (1984) stresses that, especially for academically less able and for younger students, almost errorless performance results in higher achievement. He suggests that teachers check students' understanding during lesson presentations and that pupils first participate in guided or controlled practice, during which teachers monitor performance to be sure that students are working with a high level of accuracy. Only then should students be involved in independent, unsupervised activities. At the prereferral stages, data are gathered to describe adequacy of lesson presentations and whether the student has had sufficient time to master and practice skills. Evidence that the child received appropriate instruction, but did not profit from it, can later be used to justify a referral for a comprehensive assessment.

Higher Cognitive Skills. Cazden (1984) criticizes school effectiveness research because it places too much emphasis on development of skills which are easily quantifiable (e.g., math activities in which answers can be judged as right or wrong) and virtually ignores teaching involving more complex, abstract concepts and development of critical thinking skills, the outcomes of which are oftentimes difficult to measure. Cummins (1984) concurs, indicating that the predominant instructional model, in regular and special education, is based on task analyses which structure learning in such small, sequential steps that the student may be able to complete each step but be unable to reconstruct the whole task because it has been stripped of meaning. Task analysis is antithetical, not only to higher order skill development, but, in the case of limited-English-proficient students, to the acquisition of English-as-a-second-language skills. Cummins recommends, instead, a reciprocal interaction model in which the teacher serves as a facilitator of learning, focuses on higher order cognitive skills, and integrates language use and development into all aspects of curriculum content. Such a model produces more effective learners and may decrease the need for specialized intervention outside the mainstream. The prereferral process should describe the instructional model being used by the teacher to determine whether the approach, in and of itself, is maintaining low functioning levels and reinforcing marginal, semi-dependent behavior (Harth, 1982).

Instruction

Before referring a student, teachers should carefully document adaptations of instruction and programs which have been attempted to improve performance in the mainstream. Adelman (1970) suggests that instruction be carefully sequenced as follows: (a) teach basic skills, subjects, or concepts; (b) reteach skills or content using significantly different strategies or approaches for the benefit of students who fail to meet expected performance levels after initial instruction; and (c) refocus instruction on the teaching of prerequisite skills for students who continue to experience difficulty even after approaches and materials have been modified.

Documentation of this teaching sequence is very helpful if the child fails to make adequate progress and is subsequently referred to special education. Referral committees will be able to judge whether the adaptations attempted are appropriate given the student's background characteristics. It is possible, for example, that a child will fail to learn to read, even after a teacher attempts several different reading approaches, because the child is being instructed in English but is not English proficient. In this case, the interventions would be judged inappropriate and other instructional alternatives would need to be recommended. Ultimately, if the child qualifies for special education services, information about prior instruction is invaluable to the development of individualized educational programs because the types of interventions which work, and those which have met with limited success, are already clearly delineated.

Language of Instruction. Instruction should be consistent with what is known about language acquisition and about the interrelationship between first and second language development. The research literature (Cummins, 1984; Krashen, 1982) indicates that the native language provides the foundation for acquiring English-as-a-second-language skills. Therefore, strong promotion of native language conceptual skills will be more effective in providing a basis for English literacy (Cummins, 1984). Conversely, a premature shift to English-only instruction not only interferes with a natural developmental sequence, but also interferes with intellectual and cognitive development. Teachers should mediate instruction using both the first and the second language, and integrate English development with subject matter instruction. Along with this, teachers should also respond to, and use, cultural referents during instruction, observing the values and norms of the home culture even as the norms of the majority culture are being taught (Tikunoff, 1985). Above all, teachers must communicate high expectations for students and a sense of efficacy in terms of their own ability to teach linguistically diverse students.

Student Characteristics

The complexity of providing appropriate instructional opportunities is immediately apparent when one considers the diversity of characteristics among Hispanic students. Student variables are discussed last to underscore that inadequacies of the instructional environment should be ruled out *before* attention is focused on assessing student characteristics to determine reasons for school failure. Otherwise, because referrals to special education frequently lead to comprehensive assessments which, given a lack of appropriate instruments and procedures, yield questionable results, the child may become the victim of an inadequate schooling system.

Language Proficiency. There is wide diversity in the language characteristics of Hispanic students, diversity which at one extreme is descriptive of individuals reared in communities where the primary language is Spanish and at the other extreme characteristic of Hispanics reared in environments where the primary language is English. Determining the point on the language continuum which is most characteristic of students' first and second language skills is important to choosing the language of instruction (Ortiz, 1984). The first step in the instructional process should be determination of the child's language proficiency, or level of skill in each language. Language evaluations should provide data which describe the child's interpersonal communication skills and should emphasize analysis of English pragmatic

skills, rather than structural accuracy (e.g., correctness of phonology, syntax, grammar). The emphasis on pragmatic skills is important because the child, precisely because he or she is in the process of acquiring English as a second language, will make numerous errors in the surface forms of English. Teachers may inaccurately conclude that these errors suggest a possible language disability rather than that they verify the student's LEP status.

Critical to distinguishing learning disabilities from linguistic differences is the assessment of a child's academic language proficiency (Cummins, 1984). In addition to evaluating interpersonal communication skills, assessments should also measure the literacy-related aspects of language. Procedures which capture whether a child understands teacher-talk (e.g., tests of dictation or story retelling) and whether she or he can handle the language found in texts (e.g., cloze procedures or comprehension checks which tap evaluation or inferential skills) are recommended. Unless these skills are measured, teachers may attribute low achievement to learning disabilities when they may, in fact, be related to lack of academic language proficiency.

Culture. Understanding cultural characteristics is an important aspect of distinguishing differences from handicapping conditions. While some behaviors do not conform to the desired or expected behaviors of the majority society, they may, nonetheless, be normal given a student's ethnic or cultural group. Such behaviors are best characterized as differences rather than handicapping conditions. Educators must learn as much as possible about diversity within cultures, and about the contemporary culture of students, so they can create learning environments and curricula which are uniquely compatible with student characteristics, with expectations and desires of parents, and with school and community norms.

Socioeconomic Status. Development of children from poverty environments may differ from that of middle class students. When children's experiences do not match those expected by teachers and schools, teachers may attribute school problems to "deficient" environments and may lower their expectations for student success (Ortiz & Yates, 1984). Unfortunately, teachers sometimes fail to recognize that economic differences affect cognitive and learning styles, causing children to respond deferentially to instruction. For example, children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may have difficulty processing information or profiting from instruction presented from a framework of independence and intrinsic motivation. They fail to perceive their own effort as an important cause of success or failure. These students will not be successful unless they are taught using strategies compatible with their own cognitive orientations and/or until they are taught "learning to learn" strategies (e.g., setting goals, planning for goal attainment, sequencing behavior, intrinsic motivation, etc.).

The student characteristics discussed in the preceding sections serve only to suggest the range of student variables which must be considered in planning instruction. A comprehensive description of background and experiences is required to make instruction uniquely appropriate to the student. The prereferral process should verify that the teacher has been able to tailor instruction to the needs of the student in question.

Evaluation of Instruction

Obviously, any instructional program must involve a continuous monitoring system to determine whether goals and objectives are being met. One type of evaluation is teacher driven and requires that teachers continuously check student progress through daily quizzes, 6-week exams, or informal observations, for example, and that they provide feedback to students about academic progress. It does not help to return a student's spelling test or math assignment with answers marked wrong but with no indication as to why responses were incorrect and, thus, no suggestion as to how performance can be improved. Simply marking answers as right or wrong does not clue the teacher about how to modify instruction or plan subsequent lessons for students experiencing difficulty. A data-based approach involving simple, informal observation and analysis of student work samples is more effective in increasing student

achievement (Zigmond & Miller, 1986). For limited-English-proficient Hispanic students, data must describe the child's functioning levels in English and Spanish.

Another level of evaluation is provided by instructional supervisors, most typically school principals, and pinpoints staff development needs if a teacher experiences problems, for example, teaching a particular subject or skill or a specific group of students. In districts which serve minority populations, staff development is often necessary because institutions of higher education do not adequately prepare educators to serve multicultural populations. Supervisors can assist teachers in developing professional growth plans and selecting appropriate inservice activities.

The discussions in the preceding sections are not exhaustive but are simply designed to highlight that learning problems occur for a variety of reasons, including that teachers do not have the necessary skills to teach multicultural populations, the student does not receive instruction, instruction is not consistent with entry level skills or is inappropriately sequenced, and/or there is no system for evaluating and modifying instruction as needed. Consequently, there will be instances when intervention will be focused on teachers and programs, rather than on students.

Step 5: Do student difficulties persist?

If, after evidence is provided that systematic efforts were made to identify the source of difficulty and to take corrective action, student difficulties persist, the next step in the process is to explore other programming alternatives within the mainstream.

Step 6: Have other programming alternatives been tried?

A linguistically different student may have been inaccurately classified as English proficient and may be experiencing difficulty because he or she needs a bilingual education or English-as-a-second-language program. In other instances, it may be possible for students to be served through compensatory education programs which provide remedial instruction. Unless alternatives such as these are readily available, referral to special education will continue to be a trigger response when teachers are unable to improve students' achievement. There is an assumption, of course, that teachers understand the purpose of alternative programs and that they are familiar with eligibility criteria for placement (i.e., which students are served by which program). Otherwise, misplacements in special education can continue to occur despite the availability of options such as Chapter 1, migrant education, bilingual education programs, etc. (Garcia, 1984).

Step 7: Do difficulties continue in spite of alternatives?

If mainstream alternatives prove to be of no avail, then a referral to special education is appropriate. The evidence most critical to determining eligibility will accompany the referral, that is, verification that: (a) the school's curriculum is appropriate; (b) the child's problems are documented across settings and personnel, not only in school, but also at home; (c) difficulties are present both in the native language and in English; (d) the child has been taught but has not made satisfactory progress; (e) the teacher has the qualifications and experience to effectively teach the student; and (f) instruction has been continuous, appropriately sequenced, and has included teaching of skills prerequisite to success. A child who does not learn after this type of systematic, quality intervention is a good candidate for special education. The referral indicates that a decision has been reached that the child cannot be served by regular education programs and that she or he is likely to be handicapped. A comprehensive assessment is requested to determine the nature of the handicapping condition.

FACTORS INFLUENCING IMPLEMENTATION

Prereferral intervention should be a formal process, governed by a clearly recognizable set of procedures, which is accepted and followed by all personnel on a district- or campus-wide basis, and which is under the jurisdiction of regular education. Prereferral procedures may already be in place in some districts; in others, a major system overhaul will be required.

Special Education

Prereferral intervention cannot work unless special educators reaffirm that their responsibility is to serve *handicapped* individuals, not students whose problems are induced by ineffective teachers or programs. While this may seem a somewhat harsh stance, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that special education is any more effective than regular education in serving linguistically different students (see, for example, the discussion of special education reevaluation outcomes in Chapter 6 by Ortiz & Yates). Rather than placing Hispanic students in more restrictive environments, it seems more appropriate to improve the quality of regular education.

Allocation of Resources

Access to, or creation of, alternative mainstream programs for underachieving students is an important component of prereferral, as is coordination of staff and services across programs to ensure that the goals and objectives being addressed by all those serving the student are compatible. Flexible scheduling and release time for teachers and others to meet and discuss student problems and to generate potential solutions is necessary. Scheduling is also an important consideration if changes in students' daily routines are required, for example, when remedial program services are recommended. These considerations suggest the need for strong support from administrators to ensure that the necessary resources are available for successful implementation of the process.

Staff Development

An important goal of staff development is to build more effective linkages with parents and the community. Parents must be provided information, assistance, and counsel to help them understand the instructional services provided their children and the various proceedings and deliberations which occur when a change in placement is considered for a child. Parental involvement is critical to addressing the question of differences versus disabilities, and especially in determining whether the child meets the norms and expectations of his/her cultural or reference group and, thus, whether behavior is normal or deviant. If adequate services are not available through the local education agency, then community resources need to be explored.

Some faculty and administrators may be resistant to training as many of the issues to be addressed through staff development are socially, politically, or professionally sensitive. For example, the prereferral process raises the question of whether regular education is effectively serving Hispanic students and suggests that dramatic changes in service delivery are required. These changes involve developing knowledge among professionals that, heretofore, may not have been within their expertise.

It is surprising that some professionals, who are not themselves bilingual, fail to see that they share responsibility for ensuring that bilingual populations are effectively served in public schools. Developing this sense of responsibility, and the skills to fulfill it, is particularly important for the success of those students who are bilingual but who are English proficient and therefore served in regular education programs where instruction is presented entirely in English. Unless regular educators understand second language acquisition, they will fail to provide the necessary language development support these students need to be academically successful. That the primary focus of the prereferral process is initially on evaluating regular

educators' competence in serving linguistically and culturally different students can serve as a powerful motivator for participating in programs designed to increase the ability of regular educators to serve multicultural populations.

Cost Effectiveness

There are major benefits to be gained from the successful implementation of a prereferral process. Serving students in the mainstream is more cost effective than placement in special education, particularly if the student is underachieving, but not handicapped. More importantly, perhaps, are the long-term benefits for students themselves, who will have a greater chance of achieving their social, political, and economic potential because they are provided an appropriate education. Unless drop-out rates among Hispanic students are decreased and academic achievement of these students is improved, the loss of earning power and the concomitant drain on society's resources will continue to be astronomical. Development of prereferral interventions, in which the major goal is to improve the effectiveness of regular education for Hispanic students, seems a very cost-effective investment in the future.

SUMMARY

Because institutions of higher education often fail to prepare instructional personnel to teach language minority students, Hispanic students are prone to school failure, as evidenced by high drop-out rates, poor performance on standardized tests of achievement, and overrepresentation in programs for the learning disabled. It is important that school districts have in place procedures which document that linguistic, cultural, and other unique student characteristics have been accommodated, before a referral to special education is accepted. Only in this way can members of ethnic and multicultural populations have the same opportunity for academic success as their Anglo peers and can the number of inappropriate special education referrals be minimized.

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